



The Impact of Visual Images: Addendum

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In briefings and presentations to military audiences over the last several years, I have offered one simple piece of advice: film *everything*. In a digital age, data storage is cheap. What is expensive is not being able to prove that propaganda claims about a particular mission, perhaps made months or years after the fact, distort the truth or are outright fabrications.

That isn't typically the type of advice Special Operations Forces (SOF) need to hear. Army Special Forces (SF) might often film their operations, using both helmet cams and embedded members of dedicated combat camera units able to go with the SF operators into combat and defend themselves if necessary, jump out of airplanes, fast rope out of helicopters, or doing whatever else may be necessary to keep up. But, why shouldn't all SOF operators do the same? The technology is cheap and readily available. Perhaps the larger problem is the difficulty that leaders might have trying to decide what visual imagery should be released. The key, is that these leaders should understand that some reasons for not releasing imagery are as important as they ever were, but today, these reasons should be balanced against the strategic interests for getting visual information out. In short, it should not be an internal SOF decision.

I recently wrote about the harm done to America's national security when the wrong images go viral. The flip side of that is the cost paid by the country when the right images do not exist, or are never released. For example, on January 25, 2012, the media were focused on what was, for the military, a good news story. Just before President Obama delivered this year's State of the Union address, U.S. Navy SEALs were rescuing two hostages from Somali kidnappers who had held them since October. As with the story of the Marine urination video, this story was the lead for NBC's

Today show, and the CBS evening news. However, there were no accompanying visuals that depicted the very successful rescue; that is, no dramatic visuals of the rescue itself, leaving news outlets to improvise.

Much of the news coverage placed great emphasis on the moment immediately prior to the State of the Union (SOTU) address when President Obama shook the hand of the Secretary of Defense and congratulated him for something, although for what, at the time, was a mystery. There is, of course, file footage of SEALs and of Somali pirates. By the time of the airing of the evening newscasts, various networks were able to mock up the typical animations that they use to illustrate complex events for which they have no video. None of these broadcasts were particularly powerful, or particularly memorable. The absence of actual visuals from the rescue constitutes a tremendous missed opportunity. Surely something could have been cleared by the time the story was made public. Imagine a shot of the faces of the two hostages inside the rescue helicopter. Their identities had already been announced, after all. The U.S. missed the opportunity to make a very powerful statement that the release of such a stunning image could have made.

Domestic Audience

For television, it is only a really good story if it has good visuals. Not “good” in the sense of “happy,” or even in the sense of “important,” but good in the sense of powerful or sustainable, a story that can be parlayed into multiple minutes of coverage. The *Costa Concordia* story may or may not have been more important than the economy, the presidential primaries, or anything else going on during the same period—but there was a constant reservoir of new video of screaming passengers, pushing to escape the catastrophe that night. Without visuals, the SEAL rescue story not only got less emphasis than it otherwise might have; despite leading newscasts, it lasted for fewer days, and the arc of the story was radically compressed. Studies have repeatedly shown that we retain images more easily than we retain words. Consequently, news stories accompanied by images are retained more easily than are stories without images. Yes, the rescue stories have images—because television is a visual medium, and reporters cannot tell a story without some images. However, the images that were presented in this case were not organic to the drama that unfolded, and they were not particularly powerful images, precisely because we have seen them all before.

The reason actual images from the rescue would have been so much more powerful is that—while I suggested a “perp walk” as a visual answer to the visual argument made by the Marine urination video—images captured while innocent aid workers were being rescued would have provided an enormously positive visual answer testifying to the bravery and professionalism of America’s military forces in response to the atypical behavior we saw with the Marine snipers and the dead Taliban. In other words, these images would have demonstrated what it is that other American forces are doing every day.

Foreign Audiences

Today's media system is a globalized one. Images seen by an American news audience are rapidly be seen by the rest of the world. Visuals of hostages being rescued by American forces send different messages to different audiences. First, there is the key counternarrative: for all of the terrible things that you are told that American forces do, here they are saving lives, and in this instance the lives of people who really are innocent. For a foreign audience, distribution of the images ought to downplay the fact that one of the hostages was an American citizen, and play up the fact that they worked for an international (in fact, Danish) aid agency. They were experts in demining: difficult, dangerous work, with no particular benefit to those who do it beyond the fact that they know they are improving the lives of the people they have come to help. (Images may be more powerful than words, but they are interpreted in the context of the words with which they are encountered.) Here, the U.S. military can be seen in several of its historical roles: as rescuers; life savers; defenders of the weak and the oppressed, and of those who cannot help themselves; constantly seeking to help others.

To those who would do harm, the release of these kinds of visuals might send a very different message. U.S. SOF have been involved in a number of hostage rescues over the years. How many times have visuals of those raids been released? If any images from those raids were released, no matter how carefully and tightly scrubbed, would that imagery communicate a message about the likelihood of being held accountable for nefarious acts that might lead some bad actors to recalculate their probability of success and likelihood of escape? To be sure, people who seek to make a living by kidnapping aid workers are probably not people with a lot of options, and may not be the most rational risk calculators either, but it seems likely that precisely for those reasons, the messages that the United States wants to send to these people are more likely to be conveyed more effectively through images than through words.

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